DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 261 491 EC 180 558

AUTHOR	Arent, Ruth P.
TITLE	The Gifted Child in Family Turmoil.
PUB DATE	85
NOTE	16p.
AVAILABLE FROM	Arent and Associates, P.O. Box 2501, Littleton, CO 80161 ($2.75 plus $0.75 postage and handling).
PUB TYPE	Guides - Non-Classroom Use (055)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Counseling Techniques; *Death; Diseases; *Divorce; Elementary Secondary Education; Emotional Adjustment; *Family Problems; Family Relationship; *Gifted; Intervention; Marital Instability; Preschool Education; *Stress Variables; *Violence

ABSTRACT

The booklet examines the effects of parental and family stress on gifted children. Four areas of family turmoil are covered: (1) separation and divorce, (2) death and dying, (3) violence, and (4) serious family illness. Problems are addressed in terms of considerations for preschool, school-aged, and high school gifted students. The first section, on separation and divorce, urges parents to tell the truth, share feelings, and involve the child in decision making whenever possible. Death and dying issues include responses of anger, support of friends, and responses to teen suicide. Three positions are noted for gifted children in violent homes: floating, retreating, or playing savior. The importance of clarifying that the situation is not the child's fault is emphasized, and suggestions for dealing with the child's mistrust are reviewed. The final section considers ways to help gifted children whose families are affected by serious illness. (CL)

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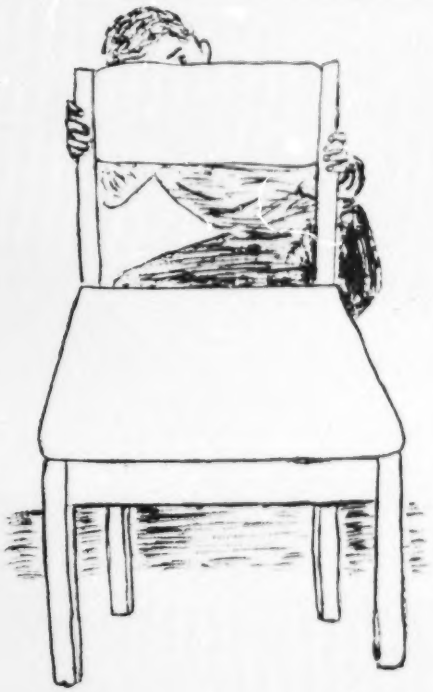
THE GIFTED CHILD IN FAMILY TURMOIL



by
Ruth P. Arent,
M.A., M.S.W.

author of
Stress & Your Child

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Pamphlets: Understanding the Child From the Single Parent Family (Love Publishing Co., 1980)

Kids: You Can Manage Your Own Stress! (Co-author, Michelle Korry Waters), 1982

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Wall Charts: The Spice Chart of Learning Disabilities (Co-author, Cora-Ann Berryman), 1975

The Child in Stress: Strategies for Support, 1978

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Cover Design by
Sally Arent McCain

Published by:
Arent & Associates
P.O. Box 2501
Littleton, Colorado 80161
Phone: (303) 753-9551

THE GIFTED CHILD IN FAMILY TURMOIL

Parental stress is contagious. Children mirror the emotional ups and downs of their parents. Children react in many ways to parental fighting, to a divorce, a death or serious illness. It hurts to see children upset. Parents and other relatives want to help and so do teachers, neighbors and friends.

Gifted children seem to be particularly vulnerable to family turmoil. They are acutely aware of what is happening to others and may be unaware of their own feelings. Their reactions to family turmoil may stultify their growth and development. The resultant damage to their self-esteem inhibits their learning and relationships and may later affect their career choice and future success. When children lose, society loses, too. Therefore, whatever adults can do to support these gifted children will have a pay-off that goes beyond the child's personal adjustment and success to the benefit of society at large. The loss of a child's great potential is a high price to pay for family upheaval.

There are three major areas of family turmoil which merit detailed examination because of the large number of families affected - divorce, death and violence. We can add a fourth, somewhat unrelated: serious illness in the family.

How can we help the gifted in family turmoil? How can we help reduce stress and give these children a sense of confidence when sad and scary things are happening? Remember that the age and personality of each child will determine how he or she handles the situation and how receptive the child will be to your input.

THE GIFTED CHILD IN A FRACTURED FAMILY: SEPARATION AND DIVORCE

When parents fight, children want to patch things up. When children live with unexplained tensions, they tend to withdraw and feel frightened. Gifted children readily recognize parental problems and react to the emotional climate by becoming anxious. They are not only very perceptive but able to synthesize observations, comments, and criticisms which denote marital disharmony. Further, as forecasters, they may ruminate about parental separation and divorce. When they ask piercing questions, they demand clear answers. Even toddlers want to know what is going on and facts that they can understand.

First, adults must tell the truth. Share all the important facts about misunderstandings. Make certain the children understand that many relationships are ambivalent. People can have positive and negative feelings at the same time. The decision to dissolve a marriage will be made when the negative aspects are overwhelming and one or both parents determine that the situation is hopeless. Help children understand that they will probably always have memories of happy times of togetherness. These memories are painful and lead to questions. Listen when they want to know "Why don't those happy times ever happen again?" In a spirit of helpfulness, the child may ask, "What can I do to bring about happy times now?" When the conclusion is "not a thing", he or she may become quite depressed. Children must be helped to understand that parents have similar sentimental memories but they do not govern their parents' decisions.

Share feelings. Express how you feel and offer meaningful opportunities for the children to express their feelings, too. Don't censure critical remarks such as "Mom, it's disgusting how you belittle Dad" or "Dad, can't you ever find something nice to say to Mom?" If the children cry - and adolescents are still children, too, offer warmth and support. Above all, listen. Attend to their anxiety and pain. Anticipate anger - lots of it - directed to every adult involved.

Involve the gifted youngster in decision-making whenever possible. If the family is going to move, let them offer suggestions about schools, neighborhoods, etc. If the parents are going to get a divorce, let the children verbalize their ideas about visitation and custody. If possible, parents should heed the children's wishes. This builds respect, reduces stress and contributes to the child's stability and well-being.

Inform the children of their legal rights. Gifted children want to know.

Extend opportunities for the children to be creative. Many fears and disturbing feelings can be expressed through painting, writing, singing, playing instruments, etc. For gifted children who may be reluctant to verbalize, such activities are essential. Do not insist that the children explain what they create. It is the process of creativity that allows for the expression of deep feelings.

Anticipate that the children will try to effect a reconciliation between parents. The gifted are able to visualize that people can change, that people can learn to be self-controlled and expressive. They may repeatedly urge their parents to make such changes. They want their parents married. It is not unusual for them to work towards a reconciliation, even after each of the parents has remarried. Such eagerness for the "natural family" can deter some children from developing good relationships with stepparents.

Look for signs of long-lasting depression and bitterness. If the child loses his or her ability to do well in school or isolates himself or herself from family and friends, provide professional help. Teenagers may

resort to drugs or alcohol. They need group or individual counseling.

Encourage the gifted to continue their activities and interests and not assume the role of the surrogate missing spouse or parent.

If the breakup of the marriage was due to a new love relationship, provide opportunities for the gifted to ask questions, explore reasons why new relationships develop and to express their innermost feelings. It is important that you remain as tolerant and open-minded as possible.

Research tells us that teenagers, as a group, are most affected by family turmoil. From my experience, gifted children of all ages seem deeply affected. On the one hand, they intellectualize; they are able to rationalize, perhaps justify, parental decisions and, on the other hand, they may not understand their own emotions. They may try to remain controlled or talk it out with their friends and other adults. Philosophical discussions may disguise a need for love and attention.

If economic problems beset the fractured family, a gifted youngster may decide to help out. Some children become too focused on money problems. They lose interest in school; they want to earn money above anything else. You may hear them plead to be permitted to sell their books, babysit until all hours of the night (even 9 or 10-year-olds will ask), cut lawns, shovel snow, and so forth. Many will blatantly refuse to accept lessons because of the cost. Tom, a gifted clarinet player, refused any more lessons because he felt the money should be spent for the household instead. He was not being a martyr but acting out his sincere conviction.

Let the gifted children regress as you would the non-gifted. The gifted are constantly attempting to solve the problems of the fractured family in ways that will minimize their own disruption and hurt. It is a hard, hard struggle. Symptoms of stress may show up. For a limited time, two to four months, let them be uncooperative, snappy, hostile and unforgiving. There are no time lines for recovery but ongoing disruptive, hostile behavior can foster troubled relationships at home and at school. Well-trained professionals can bolster kids when they need it and provide a foundation for workable interactions among all concerned. Again, honesty helps minimize stress and foster good communication. There is no way to prevent the reality of loss and grief when a family breaks up. The children's recovery will be a direct reflection of the quality of the relationship developed and maintained by the parents. If parents continue to fight, are bitter and inconsistent, children will suffer.

Bear in mind that living with a single parent is not necessarily injurious to a child's development. As the child of divorce adjusts to a new lifestyle, one may see unusual growth, independence and insights. Gifted children, in particular, seem to find constructive ways to deal with troubled times and may make clear decisions not to be demanding or obnoxious and act accordingly. Many of them choose to be uncommunicative rather than to say unkind things or ask questions which may upset a parent or sibling. This ability to anticipate the effects of one's behavior is a quality that the gifted frequently display.

Many gifted children will reach out to help others with personal grief and anxiety. Inasmuch as the gifted under-

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stand the needs of others, such unselfishness is not unusual, but it does not always work that way. Some may simply state, "If I can figure out what to do, they can, too!" Remember that at this time, more than ever, children need love, affection, open communication and immeasurable patience from adults. If you are a parent having to make your own adjustment, this is a big order to fill. But it is essential! If you are a teacher of the gifted, take time to reach out and be loving. Your efforts will be appreciated.

THE GIFTED CHILD IN GRIEF: DEATH AND DYING

It is difficult to adjust to a death in the family or the loss of a close friend. Each survivor will react differently. It is influenced by the relationship that existed between the survivor and the deceased. If the relationship was a happy one, the loss is great but positive memories may benefit recovery. If there was a lot of anger and ambivalence, the survivor may feel guilt and remorse which can complicate the grief process. The recovery of a bereaved child may be similar to that of other members of the family displaying depression, outrage, numbness, disorientation and inertia. Reactions common in adults may seem exaggerated or bizarre in children. Some may reach out to express sympathy to others as if on a mission. The child intent on helping others may be trying to avoid or postpone confronting his or her own feelings.

Adults need to be prepared to help gifted children handle death and dying. The first consideration is the cause of death. Basically, there are four possible histories - natural death, accidental death, homicide and suicide. Natural deaths may be sudden such as from heart attacks, or prolonged, even expected, as from cancer. When the cause of death is combined with the complexities of the relationship and the age and personality of the survivor, it is clear that there is no way to predict how any person will react. Nevertheless, some observations characterize the gifted child in grief.

The Pre-school Gifted Child

These children seem to be able to grasp the concept of the finality of death more readily than non-gifted youngsters of the same age. They have an unusual ability to grasp both tangible and abstract concepts, and to use them. This requires adults to be honest and to use a vocabulary that children can understand.

Most of these children are highly verbal - able to ask questions and seek the information that they want to know. They may become impatient with adults who do not give them explicit information. In some cases, it seems as if even three and four-year-olds have an insatiable curiosity, occasionally bordering on the morbid. Some gifted children may appear obsessed with repeating details of a fatal accident or illness - not so much to get attention but as a device for accepting the reality of death.

The pre-school child will show sadness, depression, fear, anger and bewilderment. Some regressions are predictable - thumb-sucking, bed-wetting or clinging. Gifted children frequently cope by playing out their feelings with dolls, trucks (crashes), hospital scenes and so forth. The gifted pre-school child is characterized

as having a vivid imagination, often peopled with imaginary ghosts, monsters, angels, etc. which they utilize in working out various scenes and to express a variety of emotions, including grief. They benefit from their ability to express themselves by having the dolls and characters express thoughts in vivid, repeated stories. This play is essential for non-verbal children who may be either unable to express their intense stress in other ways or may be reluctant to do so.

The gifted pre-schooler who has suffered multiple losses (e.g. both mother and father killed) may adopt the attitude "I'll take care of me. I'll be strong." This is not a conscious decision but becomes the way the child tries to protect himself from further loss. As the child gets older, he or she may have difficulty being close to any caretaker and use anger to cover his or her basic fear.

The School-aged Child in Grief

Dramatic symptoms of bereavement show up in the classroom. The child stops reading, stops trying to excel at school and withdraws from his classmates. The child may appear distracted, focusing solely on the enormity of the loss. Many times the child only goes through the motions of learning and refuses to memorize or do any routine or boring tasks. This phase may be a brief as a week or persist for several months.

For some, the need to be creative is paramount. As demonstrated by Anne Frank, the child who has suffered losses or who faces death maintains threads of good mental health or copes successfully through creative endeavors. This is no time for evaluation or comment. The creative experience must be understood as part of the grieving process.

The gifted school-aged child may have a history of being a leader or perhaps a skillful manipulator of the other kids in the class. When working through a death, this child may exploit his or her power position and mobilize classmates and others as a "grieving committee." The group of devotees are cast as listeners and sympathizers. In some ways, this may be healthy because children want to care for each other. However, if this persists to the detriment of the others, e.g., such as in prolonged time away from academics, sports or spontaneous play, then it is suggested that an adult direct the situation and become involved with the bereaved child, serving as a substitute for the group. The gifted child predictably enjoys adult companionship and adult-child involvement is not an unfamiliar dyad.

Remember that the most common response to death is anger. The gifted child is no exception. He compounds his anger with many detailed questions which may be regarded as a manifestation of his ability to analyze and synthesize. For example, he will take apart the information about the treatment his deceased mother received when she was hospitalized for cancer. He will be angry that Dad didn't consult with ten more doctors or move her to a bigger hospital, another city or try some new method of treatment. In exploring such ideas and in expressing anger and doubt, the child is dealing with

his loss. The surviving parent should expect such a barrage of questions and not become defensive. The child may be playing back what he or she has heard grown-ups say.

The school-aged gifted child is unusually receptive to guidance and understanding about the stages of dying. Whether the child is confronting the impending death of a friend or relative or a death that has occurred, the formal description of Kubler-Ross's theory is beneficial. In her book, "Death and Dying," Elisabeth Kubler-Ross identified five stages. These are (1) denial, (2) anger, (3) bargaining, (4) depression and (5) acceptance. She specifies that not all persons will go through all stages or in any set pattern, but the reactions are predictable. Gifted children welcome such cognitive content and will, in time, synthesize or blend it with their emotions. They can help their siblings and friends to grasp the concepts.

The Gifted High School Student and Grief

The gifted adolescent turns to friends for comfort. He or she wants to ask piercing questions, to be told all the facts and feel free to express any emotion.

The student may get involved in teaching classes on Death and Dying, or pulling together the content for the teachers or counselors.

In the matter of teen suicides, the trend shows that a high proportion are gifted young people. This does not denote emotional instability, but reflects a profound sense of incompetency stemming from a sincere, all-pervasive need to be effective in such matters as preventing a nuclear holocaust or starvation around the world. When they decide that they are not going to have significant impact, they rationalize "I'm another mouth to feed." or "Why face a deadly future?" Such thoughts may trigger self-destructive acts. The death of a gifted friend and the loss of his talents are very painful indeed. The survivors need **much** understanding and sympathy plus extensive encouragement to continue to pursue their own talents.

The gifted high school student may handle grief by becoming intensely interested in cosmic, metaphysical, spiritual concerns. He or she may dwell on matters such as life after death, reincarnation, transmigration of the soul and so forth. Adults are urged to be open-minded, willing to learn and participate; to go beyond tolerance and understanding. Interest in such concerns can be a growing time for everyone and prove most beneficial to the recovery of a bereaved person.

In the family -

the teenager may want to contribute to the decisions which need to be made - funeral arrangements, new homemakers to be hired, and so forth.

the gifted high school student may want to take over a myriad of new responsibilities. It is important for adults to keep this in balance. Even though the efforts and offers of the child are appreciated, the goals of successful schooling and career preparation must not be sacrificed.

THE GIFTED CHILD IN A VIOLENT HOME

Three Positions Which Gifted Children Choose

Everyone in a home with persons who lose control lives under stress. The ongoing anxiety is immeasurable. Guilt, insecurity, anger and even hatred may abound. The gifted child who lives under such conditions is known to choose one of three adjustment patterns - **float, retreat** or **play savior.** A little girl named Holly reacts to violence by becoming a "floater." She finds it impossible to set goals and work to achieve them. School is unimportant and outside activities, even hobbies, are meaningless. She even pulls away from relationships that are very important to her. She over-reacts to any sign of rejection or to an unfriendly incident. Summarily, the floater is fragile, full of anxiety, unable to focus, and appears spacy.

Jack, age 11, decides to **retreat.** He may become absorbed in activities, school work, books, computers, TV, or simply refuse to come home. When forced to enter into interactions with others in the family, he may be formal, unemotional and deliberately detached. Those above 10 years of age, may protect themselves by refusing to share anything personal, pretending that the emotional displays of others are too repulsive. Such children make certain that they do not become involved. They neither provoke others nor respond to their pleas for help and comfort. Predictably, if violence erupts when they are home, they leave, or hide in their rooms, which disassociates them from such "disgusting behavior." It is not snobbery as such, but very controlled withdrawl - thoughtfully rationalized. It is not that they are insensitive or unloving. They decide that retreat is the safest position to take. It is tantamount to an emotional turtle shell.

Consider Lenny, the gifted child who prefers to play **savior.** He selects a caring lifestyle as a reaction to living with violent people and strives to become the peacemaker. He may try endlessly to get the violent person - when under control - to seek help or to talk over problems. He may adopt the role of therapist or spend hours with the victims of the batterings whether parent or sibling. As savior, the child is sympathetic and loving and hopes that the care he or she extends may compensate for the cruel treatment dealt out by others. These are fruitless endeavors, for the most part, because a child is in no position to repair the damage that results from violence and abuse. Even more disheartening, he cannot prevent the violence. His self-esteem may suffer because of this frustration. The scenario for Lenny might go like this: As savior, Lenny can't stand to watch his father throw his mother against the wall and to hear the filthy names he shouts. Lenny is 14 years old - gifted, sensitive and articulate - the son of well-educated parents. His father is a judge. He knows better than to yell at his dad or to get involved physically. He doesn't want to get hurt. He senses he'd better stay out of the way when Dad is out of control. Habitually, Dad will leave the house after such an episode. Lenny will hasten to comfort his mother. He will make certain that he doesn't put her down for staying with Dad. Instead he offers aid - physical and emotional. He tells her repeatedly how much he loves her. He exclaims that he wishes he could smash his father - throw him out - because he hates him for hurting her. He tolerates his mother's tears

and severe mood swings (she's alternately cowering, depressed, panic stricken and savagely angry). This gifted boy believes his most important function is to support his mother. His relationship with his father is rife with fury, distress and disappointment. It hurts Lenny's self-esteem when it is too painful for him to identify with his dad, yet he feels he should respect his dad's position and professionalism.

There are time-tested strategies that benefit these gifted children whether they try to handle family violence as floaters, retreaters or saviors. Certainly, they cannot be in a more traumatic situation. The gifted may be more aware of the subtle dynamics of family relationship than their non-gifted siblings. Nevertheless, the conflict between their intense feelings, on the one hand, and their intellectual understanding of the situation, on the other hand, require clarity. The gifted child may be totally unaware of his own real feelings even though he can reason and explain logically everyone else's behavior. At some point, he must work through his anger, grief and fear. This process may be so overwhelming that serious mental health problems arise.

Concepts and Procedures Which Help

This useful checklist of potent and constructive concepts and procedures may be used by a friend or professional with a gifted child in family violence. Bear in mind that children may be vividly defensive of **both** parents, loving and even admiring them in spite of the violence. This checklist provides ideas which children can understand and think about and which, in turn, may ease their pain and reduce some of their anger. Fear, however, will not abate until the violent parent either is out of the scene or is in significant therapy. Again, this list is to help the children cope with a terrifying even life-threatening situation.

An adult should clarify for children:

when father (or mother) loses control, it is not the child's fault. The child may have said something unkind or been obnoxious, but the parent's loss of control is his (or her) weakness. Other parents find many other ways to handle tense situations. If Dad's hitting Mom (regardless of what started the incident), his violent personality is his problem. The fact that Mom chooses to stay with him is Mom's problem. Mom needs help to get out of this mess and Dad must have help, too.

It is important that a child understands the "Battering Syndrome." Explain how tensions build and precipitate a violent episode, and how remorse, apologies and expressions of love follow. After a period of peace, tensions start to build again and the cycle repeats. Help the children understand the power of remorse - and how the victim gets caught in the apologies. I am sure the child has heard the mother (victim) say "See, your Dad is really sorry that he broke my nose and he promises to stop being so critical. I really should be more conscientious about cleaning the top of the refrigerator. That's what made him so mad" or "I've got to try to be more loving, or - or - or." When Dad is so apologetic, so sweet, Mom says "He really loves me so much, how could I possibly leave him?" Don't be afraid of the word "battering." Older youngsters can appreciate this label especially if they should accompany Mom to

a Safe House for battered persons. In turn, they can help the little ones understand the dangers involved.

Talk about feelings - guilt, anger, despair, frustration, impatience, love, sympathy, compassion, empathy, fear, trust, et al. You should be relentless in your insistence that the children express feelings and that they appreciate the feelings of all the others in the family. As a mom or dad, it is painful to hear how much the children suffer and how deeply they are hurt by living in a violent home. Maybe this awareness is necessary in order for a parent or even a family to change.

Help the children realize that the violent parent is not violent on purpose - that violence represents a flaw in a personality. Picture Dad as a person who can be controlled in some circumstances (on the job or out with friends) but doesn't have the internal strength to hold himself together at home when even trifles can make him mad. The child must struggle with the two sides of the parent's personality, but this still does not make battering acceptable. The incest victim must know the parent is ill.

Help the gifted to realize that they cannot repair or fix the relationship between Mom and Dad or between Dad and sister or whomever. They cannot be peacemakers. There is no way anyone can negotiate the relationship between others. We can only take care of our own relationships. Gifted children readily grasp these concepts.

Help a child in a search for answers to unanswerable questions. If Lenny's sister, Louise, has been burned by Dad, or Mom has broken Dan's arm, Lenny is also victimized. Lenny's feelings of helplessness may haunt him. His fury toward the battering parent will surely contaminate the parent-child relationship. He needs someone to answer the question "How come Dad always picks on Louise? Why not me?" This question can cause him endless discomfort. It may or may not be impossible to come up with a satisfactory answer. Research tells us, it is frequently the handicapped or impaired child who is singled out to be the victim. We do not have research on how frequently the gifted child may be the victim. He or she, may be the odd member of the family - the different child. When the gifted retreat from the field of battle in order to be self-protective, the parent may become enraged and threaten the child, too.

Assist Lenny or any child to conceptualize or verbalize about <u>ongoing</u> problems in the home. "Dad always expects us to be grownups" or "Mom is always depressed and unhappy. She shows it by slamming doors, being nasty and twisting my arm 'til it almost breaks." Help Lenny to understand that many parents who batter their kids really want these same kids, even preschoolers, to be very grown-up and, indeed, to take care of them.

Talk about other significant problems Mom or Dad faces - drinking, loss of job, threatened divorce, recent death in the family, lack of friends, or the like. Talk about how big problems can make a grown-up feel like a failure - and those feelings may be acted out by violent behavior. If the parent has a drug or drinking problem, this also triggers violence. This discussion may support your

efforts to have the child see that Dad's violent behavior was not the child's fault.

Ask if the kids know about how their grandparents used to punish or handle Mom or Dad. You may want to point out that if Mom or Dad were beaten, burned or abused as children, such mistreatment set behavior patterns that the next generation might well follow. The cycle can be broken only when the younger generation receives support and insights which give them maturity, impulse control and self-esteem.

Encourage the kids to pursue their own interests and activities. This helps a child to maintain a sense of distance from the family and balance in his life. It is hard work - especially if the child is depressed and worried about an injured or hospitalized sibling or parent. Remember that adolescents may talk freely to their friends - and their friends' parents - and should be encouraged to do so.

Instruct kids how to call for help. Sheriff's department personnel may be very caring and helpful. A teacher may be willing to call for the child. Calling grandparents or relatives may only complicate matters because they may tend to become very emotional, may defend the battering parent or add to the raw feelings of the situation. It is best that the children understand the possibility of short-term placement as a life-saving precaution. Expect some children, depending on age, to plead for safety.

If the child is the victim, explain the importance of professional help. Even though the gifted child can think of plausible explanations and excuses and appear to adapt to physical or verbal abuse, it is important that the issues of trust, pain, brutality and disloyality be addressed.

Verbal abuse can be deadly, too. Gifted children are highly verbal and when they are bombarded by lethal put-downs, insults, slurs and name-calling, they can feel overpowered. Parental slams are hard to counter when one hears repeatedly "You're dumb" or "You're a pig" or "I can't stand having you around." Children are reluctant to defend themselves or perhaps do not know how. They may be worried that if they say something wrong that the verbal attack may escalate into a physical attack. In effect, they are losing at their own game - words, words, words - and the damage to their self-esteem is immeasurable. It is not only immeasurable, it may require years to repair.

Discussion

Don't offer reassurances that you cannot guarantee such as "I'm sure Daddy is really sorry and that he won't do it again." This may not be supported by the history or the information that you have about battering persons.

There is no glamour or mystique in the task of giving support to a child from a violent home. It is incredibly difficult. You are involved with traumatized children who are understandably mistrustful. Many have known years of deep fear and anger. Many have no way to visualize living without conflict. Many have become sour on life - depressed, callous and suspicious. Some have already learned that violence means power and they have become

cruel to animals and to others in the family. Their friendships may also be tentative and testy.

You may feel very sympathetic toward the children, but they need more than sympathy. You must provide workable concepts that they can internalize plus repeated opportunities to express their deep feelings. **They don't need you to condemn the battering parent.** The children themselves want to find a way to excuse the battering and to re-establish positive attitudes and a positive relationship with that parent. They will accept help **only** if you judiciously avoid condemning the battering parent. **Do not ask unnecessary questions.** At some point, the child may want to tell some of the gory details, but as part of his or her recovery, not to satisfy your curiosity.

If the child has been hospitalized or separated from the family by placement or parental incarceration, the stress is compounded. Knowing that the child has had to endure such extra traumas, is your cue to talk about why such decisions were essential. Always emphasize safety. Always reassure a child that your devotion to him or her is not tainted or jeopardized because of family problems. Support his or her individuality and the qualities you admire and respect. Make statements about the laws and their requirements.

Professional Help For All

Professional help **is** available for all members of the family. Counselors, psychologists and other mental health persons may be regarded as experts to whom a parent can turn on behalf of the children and the grownups. When teachers recommend that parents go for support or advice, they must reassure the parents that using the services of experts is **not** a sign of parental weakness or failure. Rather, the parent is networking on behalf of the family - a worthwhile decision indeed.

How gifted children respond to professional help is determined by age, personality and the adjustment role that the youngster characteristically plays. It is profoundly difficult to give up or modify a role, such as savior, which provides feelings of competency. In the course of therapy, it may be advisable, for many reasons, to encourage the child to be less responsible, and to welcome dependency. It is hard to confront buried feelings and deep-seated fears, but it is essential.

The gifted teenager in family turmoil may resist any offer of help. He or she will look to inner strengths to "tough it out." "I've dealt with this stuff all my life and I don't need any advice from a shrink." "My friends will help me." "Hey, it's not my problem if my mother can't decide to kick my dad out." But it is the child's problem - even though he or she denies it, pretends it doesn't exist or that everything is under control. Some need help to admit that they won't let themselves face the anger and fears that have become so familiar. It is scary to let go of a defense that has worked so well for such a long time. However, programs such as Alateen, for the teen-age children of alcoholic parents, have demonstrated that teenagers do benefit **a lot** from group activities and individual counseling. If nothing else, it tells him the problem is not unique - that he is not alone in his discomfort. If a gifted child initially rejects the suggestion to go for help, it is recommended that you bring up the matter repeatedly or make the

decision and act on it. The reminders carry important messages: (1) I'm worried about you, (2) I know that the problem has not disappeared, (3) I care enough about you to risk your getting angry at me if I repeat a suggestion or place you into a program which may anger you and lastly (4) I have confidence that help is worthwhile. If the teenager insists that the parents get help or that all go together, it is essential that the adults be ready to participate. If this is not possible, this shall not preclude help for the child.

The gifted child in family turmoil requires the attention and efforts of adults. Don't fall into the trap of a ready explanation: "Harry's gifted. He understands. He can figure things out. He'll work it out on his own." Such statements do not apply when divorce, death, violence, physical or mental abuse severely damage the emotional well-being of the kids. The children need support. Giftedness is not a remedy for despair.

Illness Creates Turmoil

The way gifted children cope with serious illness merits brief discussion, even though it is quite unlike other stressful family problems discussed here. If the child is ill, caretakers should expect an endless number of questions. What's the matter with me? Tell me all you know about the disease. What is ahead for me? When will I get better or will new problems show up? What medicines and treatments will the doctors prescribe? Is there anything that they can be doing? How many other kinds of doctors (or therapists) will I have to deal with? Older gifted patients may delve into the history of the disease or become intent on doing research. They do not see themselves as guinea-pigs but they display a concern for other victims of today and the future. It is interesting that children as young as four become impatient, even angry, if the answers to their questions are superficial or too brief. Such answers are seen as a brush-off. The children, even those with a dread disease such as leukemia, will display their giftedness in the ways that they may orchestrate their appeals for comfort with their acts on behalf of the caretakers and family.

If a member of the family is stricken, the gifted child may ask questions similar to those described above. The child may become a caretaker - one who finds many creative and entertaining ways to comfort and please the patient. The gifted will be philosophical about tasks and responsibilities as long as he or she feels that each member of the family is appreciative and carries his or her load, too. If the patient has a terminal illness, the gifted child may utilize knowledge, such as the Kubler-Ross concepts, in order to cope with the situation and to help others. This child may function in a mature way - perhaps well beyond his years - but still requires support from an adult in order to process his or her own feelings.

Epilogue

Family turmoil is not preplanned. Although everyone is a victim, there may be benefits in even the most traumatic situations. For the gifted, there are various opportunities to assume leadership, take on responsibilities, provide care, be creative, to learn to be self-protective and become open to feelings. It is sad that sometimes it is only under adverse circumstances that we take notice of the special ways that gifted children cope or that we ponder on the needs that they may have. As Francis Bacon wrote, "He knows not his own strength that hath not met adversity." All of us must remember that gifted children require love, affection, respect and appreciation.